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## Senegal, Russia sign military accord, eye fisheries

(Agencies)

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DAKAR - Russia signed a military cooperation accord with Senegal on Friday and agreed to deepen ties with the West African country, including a possible deal to let Russian trawlers into Senegal's Atlantic fishing grounds.

Senegal, a former French colony, has strong and longstanding links with Western powers like France and the United States, but has broadened its ties in recent years with the Middle East, Latin America and Asia.

Senegalese Foreign Minister Cheikh Tidiane Gadio said the accord would essentially cover training and an "exchange of experience" between the two countries' military forces.

But he acknowledged the deal may raise eyebrows in the West, reassuring fellow ministers and reporters at a signing ceremony that "this accord is perfectly innocent".

Senegal's army is respected across a continent where it has taken a prominent role in a number of peacekeeping operations, including the African Union force now in Sudan's Darfur.

Gadio and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov also signed a memorandum of understanding on political consultations between the two countries. The ministers gave few details of the texts.

Lavrov made it clear Russia was interested in gaining access to Senegal's rich offshore fisheries, which yield hundreds of thousands of tonnes of fish each year to local and foreign fishing operations.

"Our wish is to sign a fishing accord with Senegal," he told journalists.

He said such an accord may be broadly similar to a deal Senegal has had for several years with the European Union granting access for EU fishing fleets.

But an implementation protocol for the EU deal has been suspended since 2006 and negotiations to revive it have also been at a standstill since last year.

Brussels and the Senegalese government have haggled over the terms of previous fishing arrangements, with Senegal demanding significant increases in its annual payment.

Senegal has also demanded annual rest periods to allow fish stocks to recover to sustain an industry on which around 500,000 Senegalese depend, many of them putting out daily in wooden boats to supply local markets.

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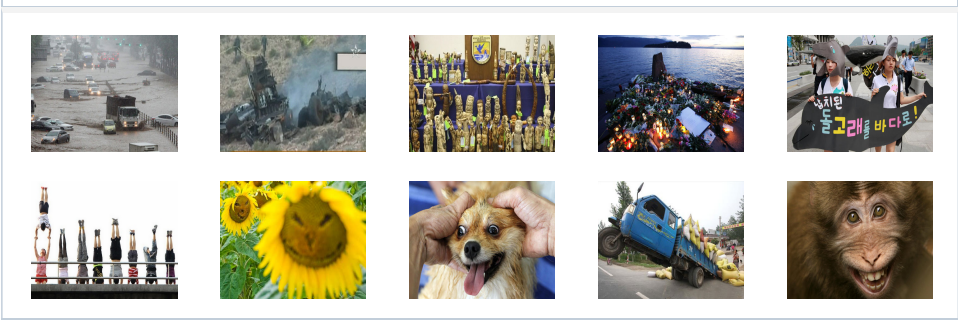
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